

*Beneath the Quilt* - 1.10.16

When she died in 1999, the New York Times described the legendary Celestine Sibley as “an Atlanta newspaper columnist who for 55 years wrote about the commonplaces of Southern life in a prose as soothing as the hum of cicadas in summer.... For generations and generations of Georgians,” it went on, quoting the Atlanta paper’s Cynthia Tucker, “she embodied the South, the simple, folksy, homespun South.”

It was one of Celestine Sibley’s columns, clipped years before from the Atlanta Constitution, that Susan Wilson handed me last winter after the Heart’s Desire Auction, suggesting that there might be a sermon in it. It was titled *Quilts Speak of Life and Its Lessons*. In it Sibley wrote of a present a friend had sent her, “printed on parchment and suitable for framing”, a Kentucky woman’s musings about religion and quilts. The woman was one Eliza Calvert Hall. She had written her thesis in 1899.

“Did you ever think, child, how much piecin’ a quilt’s like living a life?” she wrote. “And as for sermons, they ain’t no better sermon to me than a patchwork quilt, and the doctrines is right there a heap plainer’n they are in the catechism....Many a time I’ve set and listened to Parson Page preachin’ about predestination and free will, and I’ve said to myself, ‘Well, I ain’t never been through Centre College up in Danville, but if I could just git up in the pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer to folks than parson’s makin’ it with all his big words.”

As a professor of homiletics (sermon writing) and oratory at Boston University School of Theology, my grandfather, Charles McConnell, taught preachin’. He had grown up on a farm in Ohio in the late 1800’s, so he knew country people. In his own homespun way, he would offer my father, his new son-in-law, advice similar to that of Eliza Hall’s. “Put the cookies on the lower shelf,” he would say, “if you want your parishioners to get your message.” My father’s parishioners in a tiny northern New Hampshire village were not dissimilar, I imagine, from those in Ms. Hall’s rural Kentucky.

“You see, you start out with just so much caliker. You don’t go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you’ll have a piece left every time you make a dress, and you take jest what happens to come. And that’s like predestination,” she wrote.

And, of free will, she said, “When it comes to the cuttin’ out, why, you’re free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind o’ pieces to two persons, and one’ll make a Nine Patch and one’ll make a Wild Goose Chase, and there’ll be two quilts made out o’ the same kind o’ pieces and jest as different as they can be. And that’s jest the way with livin’. The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut ‘em out and put ‘em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there’s a heap more in the cuttin’ out and the sewin’ than there is in the caliker.”

It’s a wonderful lesson. I can see it in my own life. I am the eldest of three siblings, just eighteen months older than my younger brother. Our genetic inheritance is similar; he looks a little more like my mother than I do; I resemble my father a little more; his eyes are brown; my are blue; he’s 4 or 5 inches taller; but otherwise, we are much alike. We inherited similar intellectual and athletic capabilities. We were raised the same way. We had similar educations. But, when we left home, we went very different ways.

There was more than genetics at play. Development is a little more complicated than Eliza Hall suggests. Birth order, differences of personality, different pressures and forces, affected the choices my brother and I each made, the choices that took us in different directions. Our free will wasn't exactly free.

I became a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and, in a radical change of direction, a salesman and eventually a sales manager for a huge paper company, living in the suburbs of Atlanta. My brother, after teaching French and, then, receiving a PhD in biology, became the director of an environmental education foundation in Maine.

Our lives could not have been more different, in every way. Other than our inherited passion for the Red Sox and our interest in natural history, we had very little in common, very little understanding of each other's world. We built very different lives. We each worked hard and achieved success and recognition in our fields, and, in the course of thirty years of adulthood, we became very different people. We grew away from each other, not that we disliked each other; we simply seemed to have less and less in common as the years went by.

This would appear to be the lesson of Eliza Calvert Hall's quilting metaphor, that we take what's given us and craft unique lives, that it's not the material we're given, but the creativity, vision, skill or whim of the quilter that determines the course of a life. It's the quintessential American myth of the individual, which holds that what we do with our gifts, genes, and talents is much more important than the genes, talents, and gifts themselves. It acknowledges the importance of the gifts, that we do not create the building blocks of our lives, that they are given, but it ignores the social and psychological factors of our lives, what psychologists call the nurture factors.

Theologians would say that, in the end, we aren't in control of our lives nearly as much as we would like to believe. That all is given, all is grace, that gratitude is the ultimate response to life. But I digress. That is a subject for another day.

Back to the subject of crafting our lives; is it possible that the life we build is not the whole story of our lives, that there is something beyond – or beneath – or within - that constructed self that is more definitive of who or what we truly are?

Developing an ego, establishing an identity is essential to establishing or crafting a life. We need to see ourselves as autonomous beings, separate from our parents, able to affect the world with our actions. During childhood and adolescence we build an identity, a persona, and become an "individual". That identity is like a structure. It has a foundation and supports. It has ornamentation and decoration that personalizes it. And it has walls that define its boundaries and protect it. This walled structure, our ego, becomes, in some ways, like a fortress. It protects us, but it also needs constant defending and buttressing. So, as we move through life, we defend it and buttress it with accomplishments, status, recognition, acquisitions, pride and illusions of certitude.

These defenses protect our ego, but they also separate it from others, isolate it, alienate it. Ironically, the stronger our ego becomes, the more we have accomplished and won, the more separated we can

become. This was the case in my own life. This was the growing apart, the having less and less in common with those with whom I shared biology and upbringing.

But the building of a well-defended and decorated ego is not the end of the story. It wasn't in my life. Time has a way of working its magic. Age and experience reveal their truths. In a twelve month period first my brother and then I were diagnosed with prostate cancer. We each had surgery, and each of us has recovered fully, without complication. We were very fortunate. But we were each shocked into awareness of our mortality and vulnerability. And around the same time we both experienced setbacks in our professional lives that we hadn't expected. We found ourselves retired earlier than we had expected - involuntarily retired, you might say.

We were humbled by the vicissitudes of life, and, so humbled, we became closer. It is not that we talked about it; we didn't; we didn't need to talk about it. It just happened, without our conscious awareness. We each came to understand, on some level, that we are not our accomplishments, our awards, or our failures. And, on some level, we came to understand that we have more in common than we ever thought, that we share more than biology and upbringing, that we share a common humanity.

What does this story say about the lesson of quilting? It doesn't refute it, but it does suggest that Eliza's metaphor isn't complete, that we might extend it. The crafting of a life, the skillful, artful quilting, is the glory of making a life and building an identity, rich and colorful, multi-faceted and complex. That is an amazing and wondrous experience. But beneath the richness and beauty of the life that we create, the color and pattern of the quilt, is an even richer self, one that doesn't need propping up, defending, or praising, one that is shared with others, one that knows the joys and the sorrows, the glories and the trials of life, that rejoices simply in being, being with others and with the rest of creation, that says with psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm that "to be is enough" and with Thich Nhat Hanh that "the real miracle is not to walk on water or fly in the air, but to walk on the earth".

In 1841, in his famous essay, *The Over-Soul*, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes a fundamental self that is one with the rest of creation. He describes this deep inner, even pure, self, this soul, as "the Unity, The Over-Soul, within which each person is contained and made one with all other, the common heart, the deep power in which we exist." We are a *part* of the whole, the One, he says, but he also says that this deep power, what he calls "the wise silence, the universal beauty, the eternal One", this deep power is *within* each of us. We exist within it, while, paradoxically, it exists within us. And it is accessible to us all, if we are paying attention. Theologians call this idea panentheism.

In the mid-twentieth century psychoanalysts and theologians began to refer to this deep inner self as the True Self. One of these theologians, the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, refers to the True Self as an "immortal diamond", for both its beauty and its depth. But, unlike a diamond, he says, we don't really *discover* the True Self through conscious exploration. Instead, he says, "it gradually appears as we do the work of growing up." For some of us that growing up takes longer than for others. In his book *Immortal Diamond*, Rohr quotes Thomas Merton's poetic description of this fortuitous appearance of the True Self. Merton says, sounding to me like Emerson, "A door opens in the center of our being, and we seem to fall through it into immense depths, which although they are infinite – are still accessible to us. All

eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact.” Commenting on this image, Rohr says, “This door needs to open only once in your lifetime, and you will forever know where home base is.”

He goes on to say that “the True Self is a shared and shareable self, with a deep capacity for intimacy with yourself and with everything, including life itself,” again, echoing the words Emerson wrote 170 years earlier.

The differences that we bring to life are wondrous and delightful, to be celebrated, as we say in our mission statement. What a dull world it would be if we were all the same! But the Oneness of our deeper selves is even more wondrous.

What is especially wonderful is that we can have it both ways: we can be our colorful, different, even unique selves at the same time as we experience the deep similarity that we share with all other humans. But we can't do that with the walls up and defended. It is only in our vulnerability that our own true nature can make its appearance – Emerson's Soul and Merton's True Self. And it is only in vulnerability that we can see and connect with the Soul of the other, which is essentially our Soul. We must let the walls down, let our guard down, breach our carefully defended identities, our egos.

This is what happened for my brother and me; it was only when our vulnerabilities became exposed that we could recognize the bond of common soul, common humanity, uniting us – when we could recognize each other's souls.

Religious community can offer a portal to the True Self. At its best, religious community can nurture the transformative growth that we acknowledge and claim in our mission statement, and it does so, in part, by revealing to us our Souls, by helping us uncover them, in the company of others, by helping us peel back the rich – and complicated – fabric of the lives we have constructed to reveal an even richer common humanity.

But that doesn't happen in a full sanctuary on a Sunday morning, which is not to deny the value of worship and its role in holding up that to which we assign ultimate value and meaning and in moving us toward wholeness in the process.

And it doesn't happen in the business of a committee meeting – or in witnessing for social justice on Crabapple Rd. or in the state capital – which is not to say that we don't learn more about ourselves and each other in those efforts.

Rather, it happens best when we gather in small groups to share our stories and our lives, in small groups where we feel safe enough to let down our guard, to be vulnerable. It is there that our True Selves, our shared and shareable selves, as Rohr says, are revealed and nurtured. It is in those settings that we can both celebrate our differences and experience transformational growth - settings like the Women's Circle, New Member Covenant Groups, Mutuality Circles, religious education classes and meditation groups.

These Small Group Ministries can provide spaces where we can get to know each other on a deeper level, see into each other's souls, and see our deep similarities, see all that we share as fellow human beings - hopes and dreams, fear and loss, joy and wonder. Join us as we offer new opportunities in the next few months to discover the radiant gem of our True Selves, buried, as it always is, beneath the surface we display to the world.

Religious community offers a rich venue for this experience, especially a community like ours, that values the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of all existence. Not all of us are ready to dig deeper into our own lives; we all have different capacities for vulnerability; but, at some level, we are all searching for meaning – the meaning of our own particular lives and the meaning of life in general. When you are ready - when the spirit moves you – join us. We will be here for you, your colorful, expressive exterior, and your even richer interior.

You may know of Andy Stanley, the senior pastor of Alpharetta's North Point megachurch. He says, when speaking of his church's small group ministries, "Life change happens in circles, not in rows." See for yourself. Take a risk. Test this hypothesis when we kick off a new Small Group Ministry program later this winter.

May it be so.

David R. Hudson

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